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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: DEA SAYS CAMBODIAN SUPERLAB WAS INITIAL PROCESSING
FACILITY FOR METH PRODUCTION

REF: PHNOM PENH 515

¶11. (SBU) A Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) team has determined that Cambodia's newly discovered methamphetamine superlab was capable of completing only the first stage in the thionyl chloride method of methamphetamine production, meaning that an intermediate product, chloroephedrine, must have been shipped to a second location for further processing. The team discovered chemicals sufficient to produce 72 kg of chloroephedrine, which could be processed in another facility into roughly 4.8 million methamphetamine tablets, with a street value of USD 14.4 million in Phnom Penh. The superlab site contains many hazardous chemicals, none of which are stored properly, and represents an imminent environmental and health threat to the local area.

Drug Lab Used in First Stage of Meth Production

¶12. (SBU) A DEA team of three Washington-based forensic chemists, one Beijing-based diversion investigator, and two Bangkok-based special agents arrived in Cambodia on April 7 and conducted further investigation of the superlab, following up on a visit by two DEA agents last week. The team confirmed earlier findings that the lab was using the thionyl chloride method of methamphetamine production. However, they determined that the lab was only able to perform the first stage of the two-stage methamphetamine manufacture process: combining ephedrine, chloroform, and thionyl chloride to make chloroephedrine an intermediate product also known as chloropseudoephedrine. The second stage, conversion of chloroephedrine to methamphetamine, is far more difficult, requiring more skill, a different set of specialized chemicals (e.g., expensive metals to serve as catalysts) and industrial equipment, including a pressurizing device. The DEA team concluded that the drug producers must have either had an additional location where they finished processing the chemicals, or sold the intermediate product to another drug producer for further processing. They noted that in the U.S., there is an increasing trend of specialization where various individuals or teams take different parts of the process, from purchasing chemicals and different stages of manufacture and processing.

¶13. (SBU) At the drug lab site, the team seized approximately 1,560 liters of thionyl chloride, 140 liters of diethyl ether, and 700 liters of acetone. They also found containers indicating a total quantity of 750 liters of chloroform,

though some of this had already been used. They also seized a trace amount of pseduoephedrine, 52 kg. of processed chloroephedrine and an additional approximately 30 kg. of chloroephedrine that had not yet been finished processing. Using only the amount of chemicals found on site, the DEA team estimated that the drug lab could produce approximately 72 kg of the intermediate product, chloroephedrine. If the 72 kg of chloroephedrine were to be converted into methamphetamine, it would yield approximately 55 kg of pure methamphetamine, which could produce roughly 4.8 million methamphetamine tablets (worth roughly USD 14.4 million in Phnom Penh or USD 33.6 million in Thailand) or 5 million crystal methamphetamine (ice) dosage units worth roughly USD 8.5-10.3 million in Thailand, according to DEA and UNODC estimates.

Superlab Site Poses Extreme Environmental, Health Risk

14. (SBU) DEA chemists noted that the chemicals on site are poorly stored and represent a critical environmental and health threat to the area. Thionyl chloride reacts with water, including trace amounts such as humidity in air, to produce two extremely dangerous and corrosive chemicals, sulfur dioxide and hydrochloric acid. Diethyl ether, they noted, is explosive. None of the chemicals at the site are being stored properly, they noted, with chemicals sitting outside in intense heat and subject to damage from weather or animals. In particular, the chemists were concerned by the thionyl chloride, which is in a building where part of the roof is missing and, despite the presence of a tarp, is likely to be exposed to water once rainy season starts in a few weeks. This could create a poisonous cloud of hydrochloric sulfide gas which could blow over to a village,

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critically injuring many and perhaps killing some. They noted that the thionyl chloride has apparently already begun to leak as it is corroding the boxes in which it is stored. The team also reported that, in addition to taking samples from the chemicals on site, they also collected a water sample from a nearby well. It had an oily layer on top, they reported, and did not appear to be potable, indicating likely contamination of groundwater as well.

15. (SBU) DEA agents and UN Office of Drug Control (UNODC) staff have emphasized to the Cambodian government that the superlab site poses a significant environmental and health threat. The World Health Organization and UNODC are working with the National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD) to determine what steps must be taken to clean up the site and to coordinate potential donor assistance.

16. (SBU) Additional details about this drug lab cement Cambodia's new status as a drug producer. It is noteworthy that the lab was only able to complete the first stage in methamphetamine production. Perhaps the infrastructure, equipment, and human capacity limitations which have hampered Cambodia's industrial development were also a factor in preventing the building of a lab able to handle the more technical second stage of methamphetamine production. However, the additional counternarcotics challenge that Cambodia now faces is not their only concern. The Cambodian government is just beginning to realize the extent of the environmental problem now on their hands. Remediation will be a difficult process as Cambodia has no experience with drug lab clean up and even industrial waste is rare here. Clean up work will have to be outsourced to a foreign firm at considerable cost, and it is unclear who would be willing to fund such an undertaking.

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